DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 818 CS 508 874

AUTHOR Dixson, Marcia D.
TITLE The Role of Communication in Mediating the Difference between Children's Expecations about and Experiences of Parent-Child Relationships: Children's Models of Relationships.
PUB DATE Nov 94
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Comm nication Association (80th, New Orleans, LA, November 19-22, 1994).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Research; Elementary Education; Higher Education; Individual Development; *Parent Child Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Child Expectations; *Family Communication

ABSTRACT

A study investigated three propositions concerning parent-child relationships: (1) that parent-child relationships influence/build children's relational models; (2) that subsequent relationships may alter those models; and (3) that communication is a means through which children can reconcile these differences. About 90 elementary-aged children participated. First, they wrote letters to their parents in school. Second, a packet was sent home to be filled out by the parents. Third, children were interviewed by an interviewer unaware of the study's hypotheses. Results showed that the difference between a child's model and his/her reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be negatively related to the quality of everyday communication reported in the parent-child relationship. Also, the difference between a child's model and his/her reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be negatively related to the level of conversation orientation. This study calls for speculation and exploration of the possible links between family communication processes and the reasoning processes of children, especially about social events such as relationships. The finding that a strong conversation orientation is linked to less difference between children's expectations and experience of parent-child relationships should reassure parents who are trying to let children do their own thinking. (Contains two tables of data and 22 references.) (TB)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 381 818

# The role of communication in mediating the difference between children's expectations about and experiences of parent-child relationships: Children's models of relationships

Dr. Marcia D. Dixson

Assistant Professor
Department of Communication
Indiana-Purdue University, Fort Wayne
Fort Wayne, IN 46805

Internet address: DIXSON@SMTPLINK.IPFW.INDIANA.EDU

CS508874.

Running head: Communication and children's relationship models

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M Dixson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Abstract

This paper proposes that children's possess models of relationships which contain their beliefs/expectations about how relationships are supposed to work. They learn these models, intially, from their relationships with their parents. Subsequent relationships, however, teach them different ways of relating which are translated into the expectations and beliefs in the model. This model is then taken back into the parent-child relationship. Due to these changes, children experience discrepancies between their beliefs and experiences of parent-child relationships. These differences are hypothesized to relate to lower satisfaction with family life.

The author proposes communication as the tool used to reconcile these discrepancies by either changing the relationship or the model due to further interaction with the parent. Specifically, level of conversation orientation and quality of everyday communication are in the family are hypothesized as creating a climate and understanding conducive to the child being able to resolve these discrepancies. Level of conversation orientation is significantly and negatively correlated with reported differences between expectations and experiences of the parent-child relationship. Everyday communication was not significantly correlated with reported discrepancies, however. Implication for these results are discussed.

# The role of communication in mediating the difference between children's expectations about and experiences of parent-child relationships: Children's models of relationships

## INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes that children begin to form relationship models within the parent-child relationship and that subsequent relationships can then alter those models. These altered models are then taken back into the parent-child relationship. However, now the experience of that relationship no longer matches the model of the parent-child relationship. Communication is proposed as the means through which children can reconcile this discrepancy. To build this argument, several key propositions are explored in the next section.

### Propositions about relationships and children

Proposition One: Parent-child relationships influence/build children's relational models.

Proposition Two: Subsequent relationships may alter those models.

Proposition Three: Communication is the means through which children can reconcile these differences.

Proposition One

Parent-child relationships influence children's models (their beliefs and expectations) about relationships.

Hinde (1981) explains the importance of the parent-child relationship by calling on the primacy effect "earliest relationships are of special importance primarily because the range of possible courses that development could take is then the widest: subsequent relationships can act only within the potentialities left by earlier influences" (p. 4). Reviews of developmental (Park & Waters, 1988) and socialization literature (Mills & Grusec, 1988) concur. One of the important early influences is the child's education about relationships themselves.

Putallaz (1987) found that mothers' social behavior and social knowledge were significantly related to their children's social behavior and sociometric status. The link between a mother's social knowledge and social behavior and the child's social behavior especially supports the idea of children forming models of what they believe relationships are like based on interactions with their parents.

Duck (1986) discusses this basic notion that "Relationships with parents can act as a model for their [children's] own relationships with other people later in life" (p. 129). He posits the idea that, not only do children form expectations about future relationships but that they have cognitive models of what relationships are and how they ought to be enacted based on their relationship with their parent(s). According to this notion, a model is a cognitive representation of what relationships are *supposed* to be like including the child's standards for

judging relationships (Hinde, 1981), his/her expectations for relationships, and norms regarding relationships. Children's understandings of relationships are based on the beliefs and expectations they have in this model. They behave according to these beliefs and expectations. The model itself is derived from the meanings (interpretations) they give to the social interactions and talk which occur within relationships. This is why Duck (1986) posits that a child may experience difficulty in relationships if "the child has no reliable models of how to conduct good relationships" (p. 132)

So children derive their model of what relationships (especially parent-child relationships) should be from their relationship with their parents. What happens when they are exposed to other influences besides the parent?

Proposition Two

Subsequent relationships may alter relationship models. This proposition takes a step forward chronologically to examine what might happen to children's models once they (especially upon reaching school age) become engaged in other relationships with people, mostly peers, who may have different models of relationships. Researchers propose that subsequent experience may alter the original models.

Hinde (1981) discusses this process as a mutual influence between actor and relationship with each affecting and being affected by the other. But the best explanation of how this process works as well as a review of literature

supporting such a theory is given by Park and Waters (1988). They state that empirical studies have found that "in forming new relationships children seek to recreate patterns of interaction which occurred in previous relationships" (p. 170). So, children are carrying their models of relationships into new encounters. This model may then be "modified by later relationships" (Cohn & Silver, 1992; Park & Waters, p. 170).

So, from peers and other relationships (teachers, for instance) children may "adjust" their models of relationships to include new ideas or, based on presently held models, they may reject some notions. What types of experiences might lead to accommodation and, thus, a transformation in the model of the parent-child relationship? Obviously, there are influences from television and other media which children are increasingly exposed to, there are other adults, teachers and parents of peers, and, perhaps most importantly, there are peers themselves. Youniss (1980) proposes a Sullivan-Piaget theory of relationship development which states that children experience two "strands" of relationship development: one a unilateral relationship (parent-child) and the other a bilateral or reciprocal relationship (peer-peer).

Youniss (1980) believes that beginning around the age of 5, children learn from peers that "a system can be created with other persons. The system works functionally,

is *open to modification* [italics mine], and gives a sense of mutual meaning" (p. 19).

The idea that the system is open to modification is important. For most young children, this represents an entirely new way of relating: one which allows them some control over the relationship, its rules and norms. As the child increasingly (especially as he/she approaches and experiences adolescence) attempts to incorporate this into the parent-child relationship, differences between their altered models of what should be happening and their experiences of what is happening in the parent-child relationship may become more pronounced.

Probably the best way to describe this process, from a theoretical perspective, is to employ systems theory. The parent-child relationship can be productively viewed as an open system. This perspective yields three important criteria: A) it is subject to outside influence; B) the "elements" of the system are interdependent; when one element of the system is affected there are repercussions (mild to strong) throughout the system; and C) the system will attempt to maintain a homeostasis (balance) through feedback and regulation (which requires a fourth criteria of adaptability) characterized by equifinality (Fisher & Hawes, 1971). A functioning system, therefore, has to be adaptable to new input from the environment. In the parent-child relationship, then, we have several elements: A) the model that each interactant has of what the relationship should be

like; B) the behavior of each interactant based on that model; C) the behavior of each interactant based on the other's behavior; D) outside input into the system. Presuming that homeostasis has been achieved at some level, the introduction of new ideas to the child about how a parent-child relationship is supposed to be could change the system in the following manner: changes in the child's model -> changes in the child's behavior toward parent-> changes in the parents behavior in response (reciprocal interaction) -> and/or changes in the parent's model -> and/or further changes in the child's model ad infinitum.

At any stage, obviously, this process could break down. If the child lives in an environment that is not conducive to the introduction of new ideas or behaviors, he/she may be fearful of "trying out" this new information. In this case, as Kelly (Bannister & Mair, 1968) states the child has no chance to validate the new constructs he/she has added to the model. This type of atmosphere is probably best illustrated as having a conformity orientation (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990), the emphasis is on cooperation and family harmony rather than conversation and open exchange of ideas (conversation orientation).

Likewise, if the quality of everyday communication needs to be high enough to allow for communication of these ideas and feelings and understanding by the relational partners.

Proposition Three

Communication, specifically quality of everyday, routine communication and level of conversation orientation, is the means by which children can reconcile these differences.

Quality of everyday communication

Dixson (1991) argues that, when routine interactions are positive, they help the child build up a "positive self-image as well as positive and stable feelings about the parent-child relationship" (p. 7). This helps "buffer" the child for those times when, inevitably, conflict does occur. The existence of positive, high quality routine interaction provides the child with the secure base from which to deal with other situations, both positive and negative, outside the parent-child relationship. This notion is in line with the idea of attachment as an organizational construct (Sroufe & Waters, 1977). Sroufe and Waters discuss how the *pattern* of interactions between infant and caregiver becomes "a source of security for the infant - a source of familiarity that is highly portable and which ultimately could be internalized" (p. 1187). A consistent pattern of quality, positive interactions provides the child with an internal, secure base from which to explore or to retreat to, psychologically, when troubled. More to the point, however is the assertion that "the knowledge that a caregiver is reliable and responsive and the elaboration of generalized expectancies and competence motivation

eventually crystalize from this as the first truly social learning experiences" (p. 1187). This supports the assumption that some very important occurrences (such as learning what relationships are "all about") may occur during routine interactions.

These ideas are empirically supported (Dixson, 1991) within the parent-child relationship in a study which asked 50 mothers to record their perceptions of routine communication occurring between themselves and their elementary aged sons for five days. The results showed a significant correlation ($r = .36$; $p. < .009$) between quality of communication, as measured on the Iowa Communication Record (Duck & Rutt, 1988; Duck, Rutt, Hurst & Strejc, 1991) and their reports of relationship satisfaction.

Conversation Orientation

The communication orientation of the family is important in a couple of ways. A child with a strong conformity-orientation is "more susceptible to influence from outside sources and tends to focus on source characteristics of the message" (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 524). Besides being more susceptible to peer pressure, such children are also less likely to test ideas at home due to the norm of harmonious relationships with parents. On the other hand, "conversation-oriented children are less susceptible to influence and focus on informational cues in the message, including the number and quality of arguments" (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990, p. 524). Such

children are more likely to discuss or "test" new relational models at home since disagreement and expression of ideas is encouraged.

Although differences can exist in children's versus parents' views of the orientation of the family communication (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990), our interest, in this case, is with the child's perspective. A child must perceive that it is acceptable to try new ideas and/or disagree before he/she will behave in that manner, regardless of the communication orientation perceived by others.

Given a high level of conversation orientation and high quality everyday communication, parents and children will be more likely to resolve the differences in the meanings and expectations which compose their respective models of parent-child relationships. Such reworking of models or meaning systems through talk is what relationshipping is, to a large extent, all about (Dixson & Duck, 1993; Duck & Pond, 1989). In order to test these ideas regarding the influence of level of conversation orientation and quality of everyday communication on the difference between the parent-child model and the experienced relationship, I proposed the following hypotheses:

## Hypotheses

1. The difference between a child's model and his/her reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be negatively related to the quality of everyday communication reported in the parent-child relationship.

2. The difference between a child's model and his/her reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be negatively related to the degree of conversation orientation in family communication reported.

## Methods of Data Acquisition

### Subjects

Since Youniss (1980) posits that this process begins around the age of five, elementary aged children were recruited for this study in two ways. The first consisted of sending letters to parents at ten local after school programs and one small town elementary school. If the parent consented, a packet was sent home to be completed by the parent. This packet contained the survey forms for the parent as well as the questionnaires that would be used in interviewing the child.

Once the parent packet was returned, a trained interviewer, blind to the hypotheses, interviewed the child. All children gathered from after school programs and the elementary school were offered a prize (troll, basketball or football cards or small notepad) for their cooperation.

The second way in which subjects were recruited for this study was through the offering of extra credit to college students in a Family Communication course at a large midwestern university. These students were required to

participate in the training session for interviewers. Then they could recruit and interview up to three sets of parents and their children. Parents of these children were required to fill out a consent form with a telephone number so that interviews could be confirmed. A random selection of ten percent of these numbers were called and confirmed that the interviews had been completed by the students. For each method, only one parent-child pair from an immediate family was allowed.

Using these two methods, data from ninety children and their parents were gathered. The demographic breakdown of this sample is as follows:

The age of the parents ranged from 21 to 48, (mean = 34.29; SD = 9.71) including 22 fathers and 64 mothers (four did not indicate their sex).

Ages of the 47 boys and 43 girls ranged from 4 to 12 (mean 8.77; SD = 1.72).

Fifty of the parents were married, with 25 being divorced, 9 widowed, 3 single and 3 separated. Duration of their present marital status ranged from half a year to 28 years with a mean of 11.42 years (SD = 6.24).

Income and education levels of parents varied. Income ranged from under $5,000 to over $50,000 with a mean around $40,000. Education levels, likewise, ranged from a high school diploma to graduate degrees fairly evenly; 30 parents reported a high school education, 30 an undergraduate

degree, 21 a graduate degree and 9 reported other education (technical schools, etc.).

The occupation of most parents fell into the categories of professional (18), secretary/clerical (14), mother/housewife (13), and teacher/counselor (12).

Family structure for most of these children consisted of living with one (44) or two (23) siblings at home. Nine were only children and thirteen had three or four brothers or sisters at home. The child's position in the family tended to be the oldest (50) or second oldest (25).

A regression analysis using all demographic variables revealed that no demographic variable accounted for a significant amount of variance in the difference between children's models and experience of the parent-child relationship nor did all demographic variables, together, account for a significant amount of variance in the score (See Table 1).

## Instruments

### Model of Relationships Survey

The Model of Relationships Survey (MRS), administered to the children, is modeled after LaGaipa's (1987) friendship behavior scale which presents a behavior and a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always." The main difference between his scale and mine is that he gives them the behaviors characteristic of friendship to judge. Since I could find no study which researched

children's perceptions of parent-child relationships, I asked children to generate five: things parents and children are supposed to do together; things parents are supposed to do for children; things that children are supposed to do for parents; feelings that parents and children are supposed to have for each other; and rules that parents and children should have about the way they act or behave with each other. The scales were designed to cover the behavioral, affective and cognitive components of a relationship. All of the questions asked either about behaviors, feelings or rules occurring *between* the parent and the child or on the part of one *towards* the other. I then asked each child to determine how often each activity (behavior, feeling, rule) should be enacted.

In order to obtain a difference score, I used the same list that the children generated for the model and the same Likert scale. After completing all the other survey forms, children were asked to report how often each behavior they generated occurs in their own parent-child relationship. In this way I was able to quantify the difference between the child's expectations, beliefs etc. in the model and how well those expectations, beliefs are met/enacted in their own parent-child relationship.

For this sample, the Model of Relationships Survey obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .72. Chi-square run on the pairwise correlations of the five items yielded $X^2_{10}$ = 82.605; p. = .000.

Iowa Communication Record

To assess the quality of everyday communication, I asked parents to complete the Iowa Communication Record (ICR) (Duck & Rutt, 1988; Duck, Rutt, Hurst & Strejc, 1991), a self-report measure designed to discover what people talk about and how they feel about their interactions. It uniquely combines measures of "facts" about conversations (e.g. time and place) with subjective measures of quality, value, impact and consequences of the interaction. It has been proven a reliable instrument for this purpose, achieving Cronbach alphas with various of its scales in the low to middle .90's in a series of studies reported so far (Dixson, 1991; Dixson, 1993; Duck & Rutt, 1988; Duck, Rutt, Hurst & Strejc, 1991).

The primary scale for purposes of this study measures quality of communication. The ten items in this scale use nine-point Likert scales to measure the following attributes of the reported conversation: relaxed/strained, impersonal/personal, attentive/poor listening, formal/informal, indepth/superficial, smooth/difficult, guarded/open, great deal of understanding/great deal of misunderstanding, free of communication breakdowns/laden with communication breakdowns, free of conflict/laden with conflict. This scale was used in a prior study (Dixson, 1991) of mother-son communication where it achieved an alpha of .83.

Since the ICR is not practical to use with young children, reports of everyday communication were completed only by parents.

In this sample, the ten items of quality of communication yielded an alpha of .81. A Chi-square run on the pairwise correlations of these ten items yielded a $X^2_{45} = 418.082$, p. = .0001.

Conversation Orientation Scale

The children were administered the Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatric, 1990) to investigate the degree of conversation orientation (CO) in the family's communication patterns. This instrument consists of a set of 26 statements designed to assess the degree of conversation (15 items) or conformity orientation (11 items) of communication in the family. The subjects responded by indicating their level of agreement and disagreement (1 being highly agree; 7 being highly disagree) with the statements. These data were gathered from children since it is their *perception* of the communication environment which will allow or prohibit their trying out/discussing differences between what they believe should be happening and what is happening in the parent-child relationship.

The conversation orientation scale of this instrument has outstanding reliability. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) found a test-retest coefficient ranging from .73 to .93 (p. 531) with alpha reliabilities of .84.

For this sample the conversation orientation scale yielded an alpha of .76, Chi-square run on pairwise correlations of items yielded a $X^2_{105} = 286.630$, p. = .0001.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis 1

**The *difference* between a child's model and his/her reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be *negatively* related to the *quality of everyday communication* reported in the parent-child relationship.**

The mean total difference score reported on the MRS was 3.04 with a standard deviation of 1.78. The mean quality of everyday communication was 7.24 with a standard deviation of 1.13.

The correlation between quality of everyday communication and the MRS difference score was r = -.06, p. < .60. So, while the correlation was in the direction predicted, it was not significant.

### Hypothesis 2

**The *difference* between a child's model and his/her reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be *negatively* related to the level of *conversation orientation*.**

The mean score reported on the conversation orientation scale was 3.32 with a standard deviation of .96.

The correlation between conversation orientation and the MRS difference score was r = -.37, p. < .001. So, as

reported level of conversation orientation in the family increases, the difference between what the child feels the parent-child relationship is supposed to be and how he/she perceives his/her own parent-child relationship declines. As Table 2 shows, the regression analysis run on the model *MRS = constant + conversation orientation* yielded a multiple $R^2$ of .13, p. < .001. Conversation orientation accounted for over 13% of the variance in the MRS difference scores.

## DISCUSSION

### How Quality of Everyday Communication Influences MRS Difference Scores

The results of this study, if not all as predicted, certainly provide some interesting ideas for speculation. An obvious question is why quality of everyday communication was not related to differences between children's expectations and experiences of parent-child relationships. There are several possible explanations. One is the lack of variance in this particular sample. The items on the quality of everyday communication scale range from 1 to 9. Answers from this sample only ranged from 4.7 to 9, very much in the upper portion of the scale. The standard deviation was 1.132 around a mean of 7.235. This gives us the bulk of the scores in a range from 6.103 to 8.367, a fairly narrow band of scores.

Another possible methodological limitation is the lack of distinction between positive and negative discrepancies

in children's experiences versus expectations. It may be that quality of everyday communication is associated with the direction of the discrepancy rather than the quantity of the difference. In this study, experience of parent-child relationships could differ from what children felt should occur by occurring more or less often than what children believe should happen. However, I did not distinguish between positive and negative values in calculating the Model of Relationships Survey (MRS) difference score because doing so calls for second-guessing children as to whether or not "more" is better, worse, or qualitatively different from "less than expected." However, differentiating between violations of expectations which occur less often and those which occur more often than they should (according to the children's reports) might yield different results in association with quality of everyday communication. It may be that a lower quality of communication which, by definition in this study, contains more misunderstanding, less attentive listening etc., may create expectations in children which are not met due to a behavior, feeling etc. occurring less often than the child perceives it should. This phenomenon is familiar to any parent who has been surprised by their child's cry of "You promised!" when the parent does not remember making any such promise. Certainly this should be more thoroughly investigated in future studies.

Another possible problem with this particular study concerning this hypothesis is the incongruency in perception between the two variables. The MRS difference score used here is based entirely on the child's perception. However, because the ICR was judged too difficult for this age group, it was administered to parents only. It may simply be that judgments about the quality of communication are vastly different from the parent's perspective than they would be from the child's perspective. This would not be unexpected given developmental cognitive differences between parents and their children. The responsibility that parents feel about their children's upbringing could also color their judgments regarding the quality of everyday communication. A parent may have very different goals than children regarding everyday communication (i.e., a parent may want to assure their child they care or to accomplish some task while the child may want praise for some behavior or an explanation for a puzzling event). Such different goals, while subconscious during everyday communication, could conceivably alter parents' after-the-fact reflection about such conversation qualities as attentive-poor listening and indepth-superficial among other items on the quality of everyday communication scale.

This is certainly true of several items regarding conflict which were gathered from both parent and child at the same time as the data for this study were gathered. Although parents and their children were asked three

identical items, there was no significant correlation between parents and their children for any of the three. This finding supports the ideas presented earlier regarding relationships as occurring, in part, in the minds of the interactant. Since this study does not attempt to deal with or claim any type of objective reality in a relationship, it may have been oversimplistic to assume that the parent's "reality" about the quality of everyday communication would be the same as the child's. In order to rectify this, a version of the ICR suitable for young children would need to be constructed and tested.

### How the Degree of Conversation Orientation Influences MRS Difference Scores

It is encouraging, however, to find that the level of conversation orientation perceived by the child within the family is significantly correlated with the MRS difference score in the direction predicted.

This finding supports the idea that conversation orientation gives children the chance to air their ideas and discuss expectations which are not being met by their parent-child relationship. The results indicated that higher levels of conversation orientation (more freedom to disagree, entertain different ideas etc.) were related to lower differences between children's expectations and experiences of parent-child relationships. A strong conversation orientation in the home may teach a way of

thinking that allows for new ideas and adjustments of old ideas in the model by both parents and their children.

This finding also brings into play another idea. Not only does a strong conversation orientation give children the chance to air new opinions, it teaches them a way of communicating and of thinking. Dunn and Shatz (1989) and Parpal and Maccoby (1985), among others, have empirically demonstrated children's learning of social behaviors from their mothers. Besides discrete social behaviors, children also learn communication and thinking behaviors from those with whom they interact. A strong conversation orientation in the family's communication patterns teaches a way of communicating and thinking which encourages consideration of new ideas, questioning other's opinions and, generally, actively pursuing information.

This idea is congruent with Vygotsky's ideas about how children learn their thinking processes. Vygotsky proposes that "mental processes in the individual have their origin in social processes" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 14). He claims an inherent connection between interpsychological and intrapsychological functioning. He explains this notion:

> Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. . . We may consider this position as a law in the full sense of the word, but it goes without saying that internalization transforms the process itself and changes its structure and functions. Social relations or relations among

> people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships. (Wertsch, 1985, pp. 60-61).

According to Vygotskian notions, all higher order thinking originates in social interaction and is then internalized (albeit not in its original form) into the thought processes of the individual. This idea means that the family with high conversation orientation is teaching its children to explore new ideas, to question old and new ideas, and, in essence, to think about their world. This is also congruent with Ritchie and Fitzpatrick's (1990) assertions that children from conversation-oriented homes are less susceptible to peer influence. Families with this type of orientation produce thinkers who look at the information itself as much or more than its source in judging the credibility of information.

## Limitations

As with any study, this one has limitations. Probably the most glaring problem in light of the hypotheses of interest is failing to obtain information about the quality of everyday communication from the child. Since this study deals with the child's perspective on the relationship and on the communication patterns of the family, it should also use the child's perspective of the quality of everyday communication occurring between the parent and child.

And, as with many studies, the results of this study are not generalizable outside of middle class, midwestern America. Samples of children that also include those from

urban areas and with various ethnic backgrounds would yield more generalizable results.

Incorporation of data about peer influence would also yield more understanding as to the effects of peer influence and whether or not conversation orientation and/or the quality of everyday communication moderates the effects of peer influence on children's beliefs about parent-child relationships.

Finally, this study did not include an examination of the content of children's parent-child models. Does peer influence, conversation orientation or quality of everyday communication affect the content of these models? Coding the replies on the MRS survey would begin to explore this question. Also, having parents respond to the MRS might offer some interesting insights into how much the parents' beliefs about parent-child relationships influence their child's beliefs. This would be especially interesting if done with a wider range of children's ages to look at developmental differences in children's models, their correlation or lack thereof with parents' models and the influence of peer influence, degree of conversation orientation and quality of everyday communication.

## CONCLUSION

Accepting even the limited results which this study yielded has some fairly profound implications for those of us interested in family communication and child development.

Since the systems perspective is unique in considering influences from both within and outside the system, its utility for studying relationships is demonstrated by findings here since MRS differences are unlikely, given the research and arguments presented, to be fully explained if only one set of influences is considered. It also shows the utility of taking a systems approach to the interactions of the family and its various subsystems such as the parent-child relationship.

This study calls for speculation and exploration of the possible links between family communication processes and the reasoning processes of children, especially about social events such as relationships. The potential "error" in this study amplifies the need to consider a child's reality from the child's perspective rather than the parent's or an observer's. To understand what a child thinks of relationships or even how a child thinks, we have to ask the child.

Finally, if nothing else, I hope that the finding that a strong conversation orientation is linked to less difference between children's expectations and experience of parent-child relationships will reassure parents who are trying to let children think for themselves, form their own opinions and be open to new ideas. It is not always an easy thing to argue with a ten year old or let a seven year old make his/her own mistakes. But, according to these results, it is the right thing to do!

In conclusion, I feel that the study of children's models of parent-child relationships and how they are impacted by communication in the family yields valuable insights into this important relationship as well as adds to our understanding of child development. This type of research pursues a primary task of relationship researchers to "conceptualize the process - the arrow part, not the end-points alone" (Duck, 1990, p. 19). Communication is that process.

TABLE 1: Regression analysis of demographic variables on model of relationships survey (MRS) difference score: age of child (AGECHLD), gender of parent (GENDER), gender of child (CHGEND), child's position in the family (FAMPOS), parent's marital status (MS), and parent's education level (EDUC).

23 CASES DELETED DUE TO MISSING DATA.

DEP VAR: MRS N: 67 MULTIPLE R: .314 SQUARED MULTIPLE R: .099
ADJUSTED SQUARED MULTIPLE R: .000 STANDARD ERROR OF ESTIMATE: 1.882

| VARIABLE | COEFFICIENT | STD ERROR | STD COEF | TOLERANCE | T | P(2 TAIL) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CONSTANT | -3.456 | 3.113 | 0.000 | . | -1.110 | 0.271 |
| AGECHLD | 0.101 | 0.137 | 0.092 | 0.967 | 0.736 | 0.465 |
| GENDER | 2.684 | 1.675 | 0.628 | 0.099 | 1.602 | 0.114 |
| CHGEND | 2.455 | 2.042 | 0.656 | 0.051 | 1.202 | 0.234 |
| GENDER* CHGEND | -1.278 | 1.118 | -0.823 | 0.029 | -1.144 | 0.257 |
| FAMPOS | 0.129 | 0.196 | 0.084 | 0.930 | 0.655 | 0.515 |
| MS | 0.108 | 0.323 | 0.044 | 0.887 | 0.334 | 0.740 |
| EDUC | 0.169 | 0.246 | 0.086 | 0.969 | 0.687 | 0.495 |

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

| SOURCE | SUM-OF-SQUARES | DF | MEAN-SQUARE | F-RATIO | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| REGRESSION | 22.927 | 7 | 3.275 | 0.925 | 0.494 |
| RESIDUAL | 208.910 | 59 | 3.541 | | |

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

TABLE 2: Regression analysis of degree of conversation orientation (CONVERSA) on model of relationships survey (MRS) difference score

12 CASES DELETED DUE TO MISSING DATA.

DEP VAR: MRS N: 78 MULTIPLE R: .365 SQUARED MULTIPLE R: .133
ADJUSTED SQUARED MULTIPLE R: .122 STANDARD ERROR OF ESTIMATE: 1.667

| VARIABLE | COEFFICIENT | STD ERROR | STD COEF | TOLERANCE | T | P(2 TAIL) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| CONSTANT | 0.753 | 0.695 | 0.000 | . | 1.083 | 0.282 |
| CONVERSA | 0.689 | 0.202 | 0.365 | 1.000 | 3.415 | 0.001 |

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

| SOURCE | SUM-OF-SQUARES | DF | MEAN-SQUARE | F-RATIO | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| REGRESSION | 32.402 | 1 | 32.402 | 11.664 | 0.001 |
| RESIDUAL | 211.123 | 76 | 2.778 | | |

## REFERENCES

Bannister, D., & Mair, J.M.M. (1968). The evaluation of personal constructs. London: Academic Press.

Cohn, D.A., Silver, D.H., Cowan, C.P, Cowan, P.A., & Pearson, J. (1992). Working models of childhood attachment and couple relationships. Journal of Family Issues, 13(4), 432-449.

Dixson, M.D. (May, 1991). Mothers and their sons: Everyday communication as an indicator and correlate of relationship satisfaction. Paper presented at Annual Convention of International Communication Association, Chicago.

Dixson, M.D. (1993). Single mothers and their sons: Everyday communication as a foundation for relationships and children's coping with divorce. Iowa Communication Journal.

Dixson, M.D., & Duck, S.W. (1993). Understanding relationship processes: Uncovering the human search for meaning. In S.W. Duck (Ed.), Understanding relationship processes 1: Individuals in relationships (pp. 175-206). London: Sage.

Duck, S.W. (1986). Human relationships: An introduction to social psychology. London: Sage.

Duck, S.W. (1990). Relationships as unfinished business: Out of the frying pan and into the 1990s. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 7, 5-28.

Duck, S.W., & Pond, K. (1989). Friends, romans, countrymen, lend me your retrospections: Rhetoric and reality in personal relationships. In C. Hendrick (Ed.), Close relationships (pp. 17-38). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Duck, S.W., & Rutt, D. (November, 1988). The experience of everyday relational interaction: Are all communications created equal? Paper presented at Annual Convention of Speech Communication Association, New Orleans.

Duck, S.W., Rutt, D., Hurst, M., & Strejc, H. (1990). Some evident truths about conversation in everyday relationships: All communications are not created equal. Human Communication Research.

Dunn, J., & Shatz, M. (1989). Becoming a conversationalist despite (or because of) having an older sibling. Child Development, 60, 399-410.

Fisher, B.A., & Hawes, L. (1971). An interact system model: Generating a grounded theory of small groups. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 57, 444-452.

Hinde, R.A. (1981). The bases of a science of interpersonal relationships. In Duck, S. & R. Gilmour (Eds.), Personal relationships 1: Studying personal relationships (pp. 1-22). London: Academic Press.

LaGaipa, J.J. (1987). Friendship expectations. In R. Burnett, P. McGhee, and D. Clarke (Eds.) Accounting for relationships. London: Methuen.

Mills, R.S.L., & Grusec, J.E. (1988). Socialization from the perspective of the parent-child relationship. In S.W. Duck (Ed.), Handbook of personal relationships (pp. 177-192). London: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Park, K.A., & Waters, E. (1988). Traits and relationships in developmental perspective. In S.W. Duck (Ed.), Handbook of personal relationships (pp. 161-176). London: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Parpal, M., & Maccoby, E.E. (1985). Maternal responsiveness and subsequent child compliance. Child Development, 56, 1326-1334.

Putallaz, M. (1987). Maternal behavior and children's sociometric status. Child Development, 58, 324-340.

Ritchie, L.D., & Fitzpatrick, M. A. (1990). Family communication patterns: Measuring intrapersonal perceptions of interpersonal relationships. Communication Research, 17(4), 523-544.

Sroufe, L.A. & Waters, E. (1977). Attachment as an organizational construct. Child Development, 48, 1184-1199.

Wertsch, J.V. (1985). Vygotsky and the social formation of mind. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Youniss, J. (1980). Parents and peers in social development. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.